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NEWS — HELPERS AMONG US

Helpers Among Us - The swap shop

JOYCE WESTNER | STAFF WRITER

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Transfer station swap shop. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/JOYCE WESTNER

Everyone in Winchester who donates used goods to the transfer station's "swap shop" is a helper among us. And maybe you're wondering where all that stuff goes if it doesn't get taken away.

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Well, there's a group of about 15 volunteers whose members are there every day sorting items into categories, cleaning up messes, throwing unusable things onto the conveyor belt for the dumpster, and even donating surplus items to the Savers store in Wilmington.

Years ago, the DPW workers would clear out everything on Wednesdays when the shop is closed, but now Wednesdays are when the volunteers sort things out.

One volunteer, Cambridge Street resident Sally Dale, told the News all about what they do.

"People have to understand what they can and cannot donate," she said. "For instance, baby car seats expire and we have to throw them out. And we have an informal rule that if you can't carry items out with two hands, it shouldn't be donated!"

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Sally Dale sorts soft items at the swap shop. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/JOYCE WESTNER

Sometimes a donor will disagree with a volunteer. According to one volunteer, a man got angry when he was told his ($2,000 bed was t and heavy), but the volunteer suggested he take it to the Mission in Woburn.

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Volunteers also recommend taking items to animal shelters or offer them on Facebook's Every is Free Winchester.

One of Dale's friends found a heavy mahogany bureau and asked someone at the swap shop who came by truck if he'd take a bureau home for her.

"You should see it," says Dale. "It looks like Martha Stewart decided it should be in her house."

When people ask her if she thinks they should take something, she jokes, "We have a 100% return policy."

Dale typically spends about three hours a week sorting things out, putting cookbooks together, taking donations out of bags, throwing away toys or puzzles that have their pieces falling out, and even raking out the stuff that falls under the tables and gets ruined by rain or dirt.

Stuffed animals arrive by the dozens, she says, and the town sells some of them but there are seldom enough bags for the volunteers to put them in. And the mention of picture frames gets Dale on a tirade.

"People put them with donations of other items and so many of them end up with the glass broken," she says. "And mirrors without frames are guaranteed to break."

So the volunteers clear away the broken glass, and place intact frames in a cabinet with vertical slots. They also have a section for breakables, such as vases or wine glasses. If someone accidentally breaks something, "we tell them, 'You're going to have to pay for that.'"

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One of the pioneers of the volunteers is Linda (who prefers that her last name not be used). When construction workers were at her house 10 years ago, she started going to the swap shop to get away from them. While there, she started sorting things out and a few other people joined her. Eventually it got more formal where the town requires the volunteers to wear yellow vests.

She says she'd always enjoyed the swap shop.

"You never know what might show up," Linda says. "And I had young grandkids back then. I'd ask myself how many toys I should buy them. But the swap shop had everything they'd want."

Linda says the social aspect of volunteering is the best part. She enjoys watching folks who come by often.

"There's a school teacher who takes children's books, and a nurse who works in Boston," she says. "She takes toys and drops them at a Boston park for local kids to enjoy."

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An unusable suitcase at the swap shop. WINCHESTER NEWS STAFF PHOTO/JOYCE WESTNER

And Wright-Locke Farm folks come and get vases for their flower sales.

She sings the praises of the transfer station director, Nick Parlee.

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“He’s so supportive; he sets the tone,” she says. “We need signs to show where different categories of items go and he said he’s going to get them.”

Parlee appreciates the volunteers and also that residents take things home.

“As right now through June of 2025, Winchester is paying $98.35 a ton to dispose of solid waste,” he says, although there’s no way of knowing how many tons get diverted by way of the swap shop.

Linda wants residents to think about what’s acceptable.

“They should ask themselves if an item is good enough for a yard sale,” she says.

Some of the volunteers work there under the tax relief program for seniors where they can get $1,000 off their real estate taxes. More volunteers are needed, including those willing to tell people that they can’t donate things that are broken, dirty, or outdated.

“Someone donated a moldy suitcase that they’d obviously had in their attic for 50 years,” she says.

Dale’s been doing this for years because she wants to lessen the environmental impact of household trash, while noting it’s just a fraction of what gets thrown out. But another reason she started volunteering is when she noticed what a mess the swap shop was.

“It violates my sense of tidiness,” she says.

She also appreciates the social benefit of providing a source for residents who need help furnishing their households. But she also notes th more affluent residents benefit.

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"We're Yankees," she says. "We like a bargain."

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The following was submitted by the Office of Sen. Jason Lewis: State Sen. Jason Lewis joined his colleagues in the Massachusetts Senate to pass legislation that protects residents from discrimination in the housing market as the Trump administration abandons its enforcement of the federal Fair Housing Act. Illegal discrimination continues

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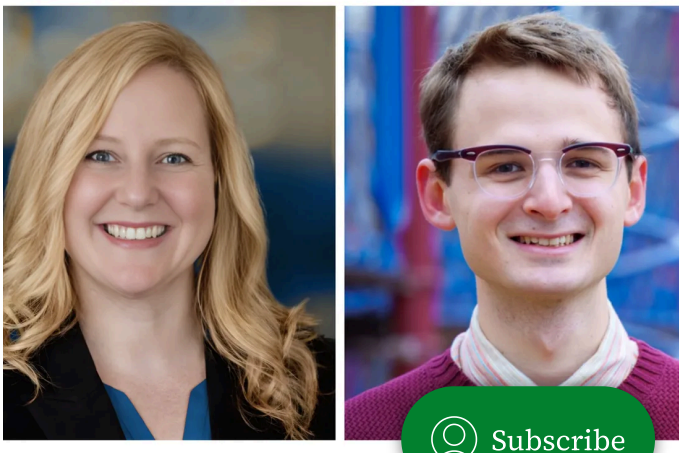

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The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: To mark Women's History Month and International Women's Day in 2026, the Network for Social Justice is collaborating with club leaders from Winchester High School and members of the Community Health team from La Colaborativa in Chelsea and

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'Chicago: Teen Edition' dances onto the Winchester High School stage

By Talia Ho | Correspondent Fame. Fortune. And all that jazz. This spring, Winchester High School presents "Chicago: Teen Edition," a bold musical that explores celebrity culture, media manipulation, and the cost of ambition. This iconic production is set in the 1920s. Performances will take place on March 13 and 14

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Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents 'Syldason: You Are Welcome Here'

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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